

## SONS AND OTHER FLAMMABLE OBJECTS READING GROUP GUIDE

(by Asad Raza)

1. How does Darius Adam's story of setting birds on fire as a boy in Iran affect you as a reader? Are you able to sympathize with his character, especially since you already know of the lengths to which he later goes to save birds from the cats of the Eden Gardens in L.A.? Does this later action rehabilitate him in your eyes? Or does his youthful sadism tell us something permanent about his inner self?
2. Throughout the novel, Xerxes expresses a powerful fear of "mixing worlds," meaning his home life and the American outside world. Why is this? Is Xerxes ashamed of his family? Were you able to identify with his predicament?
3. Consider the novel's portrait of contemporary Los Angeles. Despite its obvious multiculturalism, the Adams do not seem to socialize or mix worlds, at least until Lala Adam befriends Gigi and Marvin. But Los Angeles is also portrayed as at least superficially similar to Tehran: both are dusty metropolises in desert climates. How does the Los Angeles of the novel, a place without "central location," relate to and express its characters' identities?
4. One of the novel's few glimpses of Iranians other than its main characters comes during Xerxes's memory of attending a protest rally with his parents. Darius tells him that "these people are *us!*" but Xerxes identifies with the "others like [him]: clueless, numb, suddenly mute children, who... were were doomed to a counterfeit feeling, like uninvited ghosts, extras, like real people interrupting a world of Technicolor animation" (p. 129). Discuss this powerful passage and how it foreshadows Xerxes's struggles with his identity, his father, and his relationship to Iran.
5. Father and son's failure to communicate is a major theme of the novel. Discuss Suzanne's attempts to get Xerxes to overcome that. What accounts for her successes and failures? Why does he react so violently to some of her initiatives? To what degree is she finally responsible for the novel's climax, Xerxes's speaking to Darius again?
6. Part Two, "Kingdoms," recounts events from the lives of the main characters' namesakes, the Persian kings Darius and Xerxes. How do these historic precursors match up to Darius and Xerxes Adam? Do they suggest that the novel's protagonists lives are, in a way, predetermined? As Darius Adam says, "Son, I hate to tell you that bad fortune in life is often answered with more bad fortune" (p. 57). Or are modern-day Darius and Xerxes able to break with the past? And what difference does it make that Darius Adam is Xerxes's narrator?
7. Suzanne's parents express concerns about Xerxes possibly being a Muslim. Does their anxiety seem understandable or exaggerated? What kinds of conflicts do you think they fear? How does the novel's setting in the aftermath of September 2001 complicate these matters, both for Suzanne's family and for Xerxes?

8. Why do Gigi and Marvin feel such a strong need to stigmatize Lala after their friendship wanes—as Gigi puts it, “Girlfriend Bitch was head-to-toe bullshit” (p. 228). Does this seem realistic? How does Lala’s being Iranian matter to this rejection? And how does Marvin’s final attempt to engage Darius inflect the angry earlier scene?
9. Darius chooses to write a letter to the estranged Xerxes on “stationery from a Zoroastrian temple” imprinted with the motto “Eternal Flame” (p. 158). What is the importance of Zoroastrianism, a religion that preceded Islam, in the novel? Why might it be important to Darius Adam? Does it provide a source of prerevolution Iranian identity? And finally, how does the Zoroastrian motif of fire impair Darius’s attempt at restarting communication with Xerxes?
10. How did you react to Xerxes’s interrogation by the “Suited Man” and security agents after his breakdown in the airport in Frankfurt (p. 387)? Later, when Lala finds Xerxes in New York, she doesn’t frame the event in legal or political terms. What do you make of their pragmatism? How do you think their history as refugees from the Islamic revolution in Iran affect their relationship to the antiterrorist efforts of Western security agencies?
11. The 1960s sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie* contains a pun on the word “genie,” which comes from Middle Eastern folklore. Discuss the importance of the show to Xerxes, who literally does dream of Jeannie (p. 170). Why does it have such special importance for him? How does the show encapsulate some of Xerxes’s particular issues and problems? And why does his dream of Jeannie metamorphose into a nightmare about a man “in turban and tunic and even beard, but completely and utterly faceless” (p. 172)?
12. The novel’s second half contains many parallel actions and thoughts, such as Lala’s plan to travel to New York and Suzanne’s plan to visit Tehran. Another example would be Darius and Xerxes’s breakdowns. Do you find them convincing? Do these twinned events suggest a kind of destiny at work in the unfolding of events? Can they be explained by the deep emotional bonds between the characters?
13. Darius is haunted by his father’s drunken dinner party announcement: “*My friends . . . You see, I would take the deaths of my very own children before my wife’s—it is true, that is how strong our love is!*” (p. 51) Yet Darius tells Xerxes about a documentary showing monkeys that stand on the shoulders of their children to save themselves from being burned (p. 371). Discuss this repetition. Is Darius conscious of exposing his son to a traumatic sense of parents as abusers rather than protectors?
14. When Darius first meets Suzanne, he thinks she bears an “uncanny” resemblance to Shireen, his imaginary daughter (p. 365). What did you make of this? Why does Darius have such an important relationship to an imaginary figure, and what does it mean that he transfers that relationship onto his son’s girlfriend? Is it a way of rerouting his unutterable, repressed love for his son?
15. Near the end of the novel, the sky is envisioned as a “happier alternative world”: “that safe suspension between the blindingly chaste original light of heaven and the nuclear ultraviolet afterglow of earth, his father, his girlfriend, him, all together in a cloud-cuckoo-land all their

own...” (p. 389). Discuss the importance of not only birds, but all objects suspended in the sky (planes, stars, clouds, etc.) in the novel. What do they symbolize? Do these objects have a relationship to the novel’s themes of mixed identity?

Suggested Further Reading:

*The Blind Owl* by Sadegh Hedayat, *The Complete Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi, *The Histories* by Herodotus, *Falling Man* by Don DeLillo, *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook* by Gary Shteyngart, *Remembering the Flight: Twenty Poems* by Forough Farrokhzad, translated by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak.